



# The Choctaw Trail of Tears

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## INTRODUCTION

The *Choctaw* are a Native American tribe of Muskogean linguistic stock who used to live in what is now southeastern Mississippi and part of Alabama before being removed to less desirable lands west of the Mississippi River by aggressive treaties of the United States government in the early nineteenth century. Their removal set the pattern for what would happen later to other tribes. This report will describe some aspects of Choctaw geography, origins, culture and history in order to place that removal in perspective, and will also describe the most important treaties involved in their removal.

## GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

The area where the Choctaw lived is within the eastern Gulf Coastal Plain physiographic region, characterized generally by low elevations and much marshy land. Major soil areas include hills, plains, prairies, river lowlands, and pine woods. The growing season is long, rainfall is abundant, and extreme temperatures are unusual (*Britannica*, "Mississippi: Physical and Human Geography").

## ORIGINS

The Choctaw may have come from the decline and dispersal of two Mississippian culture centers of the Southeast, one at Moundville, Alabama, and another near the Pearl River, Mississippi (*Hoxie*, 48). Hoxie suggests that these centers may already have been on the decline before contact with Europeans.

Choctaw origins are uncertain, but most of their origin stories involve the magnificent Choctaw mound called Nanih Waiya in what is now Winston County, Mississippi. There are two main versions of Choctaw origins (*Swanton*, 7). In one, the ancestral Choctaw emerge from a hole or cave near this mound to the upper world. The other version has this mound being at the end of their migration from further west, sometimes in common with other tribes, particularly the Chickasaw. This type of mound was usually the center of a fortified village, and may have been a defensive position against the Chickasaw who settled to the north (*Stahl*, 3). There are only minor differences between the Choctaw and Chickasaw languages. There is evidence that the Choctaw and Chickasaw peoples were originally one group, and split off from each other (*Britannica*, "Choctaw").

## CULTURE

Choctaw society was matrilineal, with a man's children reckoned to belong to his wife's clan. The maternal uncle was most important in raising the children (*Reeves, 78*). There were two moieties that were strictly exogamous, unlike those of the Chickasaw (*Swanton, 76*). The Choctaw had many games. Of these, Stickball, or ishtaboli, is the most important (*Swanton, 140*). Whole villages would play against each other, sometimes wagering all their movable possessions. The women would go about giving encouragement and water to the men, and occasionally whacking them with a stick if they felt the men weren't playing hard enough! (*Swanton, 147*)

## GOVERNMENT

The Choctaw Nation was divided into three districts, each with a mingo (principal chief) who was elected by the men of the district (*De Rosier, 7*). The mingo was assisted by elected captains and subcaptains who implemented his directives at the local level. National council meetings were arranged by the three mingos. Unlimited public debate was allowed on issues at hand (*De Rosier, 9*). Speakers were never interrupted (*Swanton, 99*). In the Choctaw system of government, war chiefs were subordinate to civilian authority. This resulted in an efficient yet democratic political system.

## ECONOMICS

The Choctaw were primarily an agricultural people, with hunting secondary to this for their economics. The Choctaw were very productive farmers. They are always ranked very high, particularly in corn cultivation in America (*DeRosier, 10n*). Except in famine years, the Choctaw consistently produced surplus crops that could be sold for profit. Their success in agriculture made it unnecessary for them to spend much time hunting and traveling. Their settlements were in concentrations of log and stucco houses around the edge of their district as a barrier against enemies, with the interior areas less densely populated (*DeRosier, 11*).

## RELIGION

The treatment of their dead attracted much interest from European observers of Choctaw culture. The deceased would be placed on a scaffold, with provisions by his side, until the flesh rotted. Relatives of the deceased would frequently go to mourn at the foot of the platform. After some time, a specific individual from the tribe who had grown long fingernails for this purpose would carefully clean the remaining flesh from the bones. The bones were then passed to family members who took care of them, and the whole village would have a feast presided over by the bone picker (*Debo, 5*).

Other than their death ceremonies, the Choctaw didn't dwell on religious matters much compared to other southeastern tribes (*Debo, 6*). They had great belief in magical practices, but did not connect this with the worship of any supernatural being. Even their numerous feasts and dances seemed to be more recreational than ceremonial. Of course, religious white people who observed the Choctaw always found ways to interpret what they saw in terms of the Christian God and the Devil (*Debo, 7*).

## HISTORY AFTER CONTACT

The Choctaws' first contact with Europeans was with Hernando de Soto's expedition. In October 1540 there was a great battle that was disastrous for both sides, but particularly for the Choctaw (*De Rosier, 14-15*). A century and a half later, the Choctaw met French fur trappers who treated them as equals. There was intermarriage. The Choctaw fought with the French against the British. The French policy was not to settle dense populations for agriculture like the British did, but to develop fur trapping and trading over wide sparsely settled areas (*De Rosier, 15*). The Choctaw had a close friendly relationship with the French from 1700 until 1763 when the Treaty of Paris removed all French control from North America (*De Rosier, 16*). The Choctaw were astonished when the British invited them to a meeting afterwards and gave gifts instead of dictating terms. This practice only continued until a treaty could be worked out with the Choctaw in March, 1765 which defined the eastern and southern boundaries of the Choctaw Nation (*De Rosier, 17*).

The Choctaw were mainly neutral in the American Revolution. Some served as scouts for Generals George Washington and Anthony Wayne, but that was the extent of their involvement (*De Rosier, 17*). While the Iroquois Nations had reason to support the British against the American settlers who were taking their land, the Choctaw distrusted the British who had driven their French friends away.

The Choctaw helped the Americans fight the Creeks in the Creek War of 1813. They were horrified that the Creeks would turn white anger against all southern Indians. Later a larger force led by the great Choctaw leader Pushmataha fought with Andrew Jackson against the British in the Battle of New Orleans.

The early United States had reason to cultivate the Choctaw as friends. The Choctaw Nation was a large buffer between the United States and the Spanish and French in the Southeast and the Old Southwest. Once the Spanish and French faded away the Choctaw were no longer needed for that purpose, and land-hungry settlers greedily eyed the fertile Choctaw farms. The situation grew worse when Mississippi became a territory, and became intolerable when it became a state in 1817.

## MODERATION, THEN FORCE

John C. Calhoun became Secretary of War in President Monroe's Cabinet. From then until his resignation in 1825, he completely reorganized every function of the War Department, including handling of Indians (*De Rosier, 40*). His policy was one of moderation and education. He believed Indians had to move, but he did not want to use force. The Choctaw were chosen first because if such a large successful tribe could be removed, it would force other Indian groups to consider their own removal (*De Rosier, 46*).

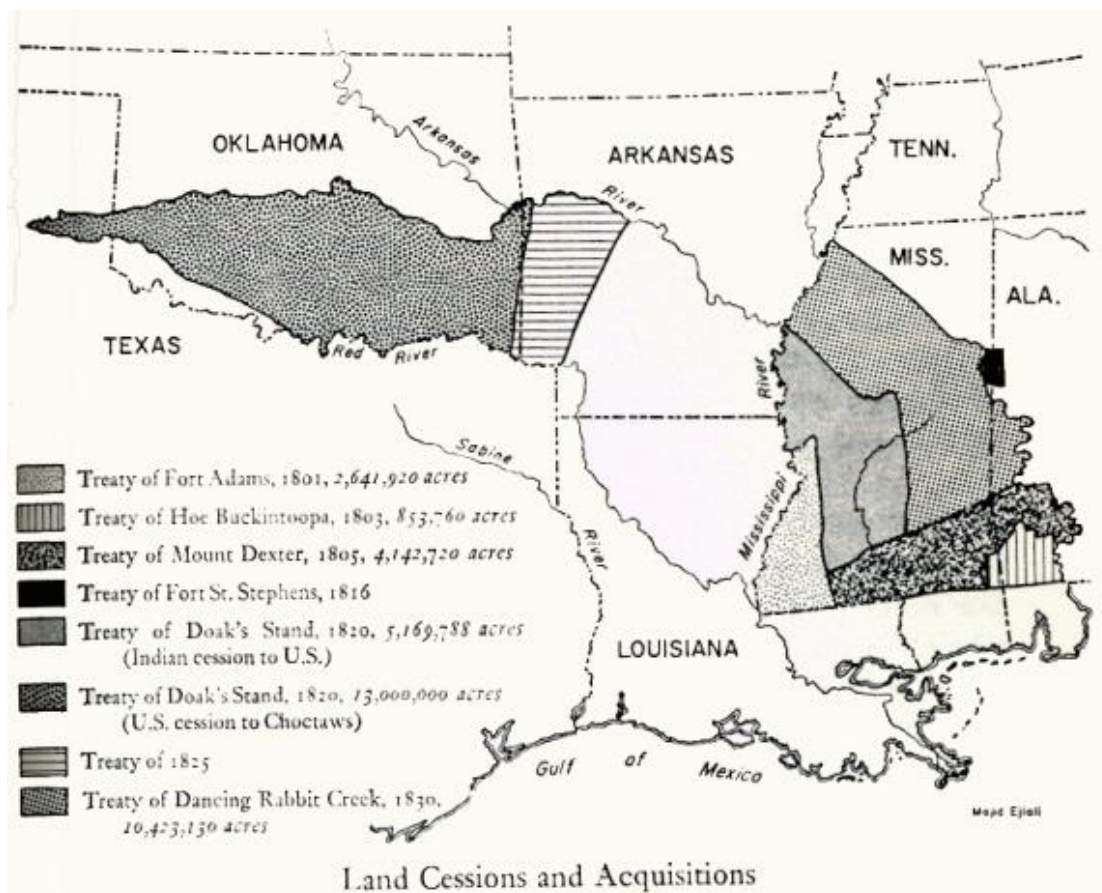
The white people of Mississippi were impatient with Calhoun's policies. Here was another example of the classic struggle between state's rights and the Federal government. Regardless of promises made by the United States to the Choctaw, these people wanted the Choctaws' land and they didn't want to wait for it. They got their wish when Andrew Jackson, known as "Sharp Knife" to the Indians, became President.

## TREATIES LEADING TO REMOVAL

The Choctaw signed nine treaties with the United States Government from 1786 to 1830 (*Reeves, 214*). The Treaty of Hopewell, signed January 3, 1786, ceded 69,120 acres of Choctaw land in exchange for protection by the United States. The Choctaw signed this in order to clarify their relationship with the new government of the United States (*Reeves, 214-215*).

President Thomas Jefferson started a removal policy to move Indian Nations from east of the Mississippi to relatively unsettled lands on the other side. The Treaty of Fort Adams, signed December 17, 1801, cost the Choctaw the southwestern corner of their territory, 2,641,920 acres, in exchange for relief from a famine. Ten months later, on October 17, 1802, the Treaty of Fort Confederation took an additional 50,000 acres of Choctaw land to clarify Choctaw boundaries with no compensation given to the Choctaw (*Reeves, 215*).

The Choctaw did not want to cede any more of their lands, but the United States government's "factory system," in which trading posts encouraged Indians to run up huge debts on credit, resulted in the Treaty of Hoe Buckintoopa in August 1803 and the Treaty of Mount Dexter in November 1805. The Choctaw were forced to cede more land to settle outstanding debts (*De Rosier, 30-32*).



(Map from De Rosier,

29)

The Treaty of Fort St. Stephens was signed in October 1816. The Choctaw ceded about 10,000 acres in exchange for money with which to establish and maintain schools (*Reeves, 218*).

The Treaty of Doak's Stand in 1820 was a bad treaty for the Choctaw. They ceded more than five million acres of their prime delta land in exchange for nearly three times as much undeveloped land west of the Mississippi, which they didn't need unless they were going to move there. For the first time, the possibility of removal was discussed openly with the Choctaw. The head negotiator for the United States was Andrew Jackson. The western lands had been bought from the Quapaw Indians by the United States government (Reeves, 218).

There were problems with the Treaty of Doak's Stand. The white settlers in the Territory of Arkansas didn't like being told they had to move for a bunch of Indians. The Treaty of Washington City in 1825 was mainly to correct these problems. The Choctaw needed tribal income, which persuaded them to sign the treaty (Reeves, 220).

Andrew Jackson became President of the United States, and he was willing to use force to remove the Choctaw. State and federal threats and intimidation forced the Choctaw to sign The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek on September 27, 1830 (Reeves, 217). Many of the Choctaw who opposed the treaty had gone home three days earlier, having cast their negative vote in spite of the coercion used against them. Those who remained at the talks were those favorable to the treaty (Reeves, 223).

## REMOVAL

The Choctaw were to move in three groups, beginning in 1831. The United States government wanted to be generous to those who left first, to encourage the rest to leave. However, there were different agencies involved, which led to contradictory orders and other complications. The supplies were to be bought locally, and local traders exploited the situation by jacking prices up two or three hundred percent (De Rosier, 140). There was unexpected bad weather, which combined with the disorganization led to a bad experience for this first group of travelers. To their credit, some government agents tried to do the best they could, but they went way over budget doing so and got in trouble (De Rosier, 147-149).

When the first wagons reached Little Rock, an Arkansas Gazette reporter interviewed a Choctaw chief (probably either Thomas Harkins or Nitikechi) who was quoted as saying the Choctaw removal had been "a trail of tears and death." This was picked up by the eastern press, and was later associated with the brutal removal of the Cherokee in 1838 (Green, 3).

The 1832 group had a better start, but was struck by cholera (De Rosier, 154-155). The government had saved money by making the Indians walk more, but at the cost of Indian lives and strength (De Rosier, 158). The third and last of the formal removals was in 1833. Many Choctaws steadfastly refused to leave. Finally, on October 1 a small group of 813 Choctaw left their homeland, and they arrived in Indian Territory by December 20 (De Rosier, 161-162).

It is estimated that there were 19,554 Choctaw before removal, of which 12,500 moved to Indian Territory, 2,500 died along the way, and 5000 to 6000 remained in Mississippi (Stahl, 7). Most of those left in Mississippi were forced to move by the Federal government later in the century, but enough remained to form the Mississippi Band of Choctaw that was officially recognized as a tribe in 1945.

## THOSE WHO WERE REMOVED

I posted a message in the Choctaw talk forum on the Internet, asking for family memories about the removal. Tryg answered and said he talked about this with Randy Jacob of Broken Bow, Oklahoma. Randy Jacob is a former Choctaw council member who knows some tribal history. According to this correspondence, some Choctaw women ground up bones of their ancestors and sewed them into the hems of their dresses in order to bring some of the mother mound with them. Randy Jacob apparently got this from several sources (*Tryg, Choctaw Talk message board*).

## QUALITY OF THE LAND

One of the disagreements between Andrew Jackson and Pushmataha was over the quality of the land to which the Choctaw were to be moved. De Rosier claims in a footnote in chapter 4 of his book that Jackson was right and Pushmataha was wrong. Some Choctaw refer to this as "DeRosier's Infamous Footnote #55." Don Birchfield, Oklahoma Choctaw, claims that anyone exposed to this footnote should immediately seek an antidote by reading "Pushmataha's Travels," by Ruth Tennison West, *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, vol. XXXVII, #2, Summer, 1959, pp. 162-174 (*Birchfield*).

The land they were removed to was not as good as their original land. It was not as fertile, there was less water and timber, and game was not as plentiful. Nonetheless, the Choctaw made the best of what they had and were soon successfully farming their new land, making it turn a profit (*De Rosier, 166*).

## THOSE WHO REMAINED

Some of the Choctaw remained in Mississippi. According to Article 14 of the treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, if they registered with the Indian agent there within six months they were entitled to retain some land there without losing their privileges as Choctaw citizens (*De Rosier, 178*). However, the Indian agent in Mississippi was a man named William Ward who had a bad attitude about Indians. He made himself unavailable, changing his location several times, and generally did all he could to stop Choctaws from registering successfully. An investigation in 1838 found such obvious and overwhelming frauds by him that several other investigations were launched throughout the nineteenth and even into the twentieth centuries (*De Rosier, 135-136*).

## CONCLUSION

The removal of the Choctaw from their homelands went through several stages. They were treated as equals when their nation was a buffer against other foreign powers in North America. When those other powers backed off, attempts were made to persuade them to leave so white settlers could take their land. When that still didn't work, they were coerced into signing all their lands away in order to preserve what they could of their culture. I would like to close with the dedication from Carolyn Keller Reeves' book *The Choctaw Before Removal*. *Chahta Ahaya Moma* literally means "Many Choctaw Standing." Surely the Choctaw will endure.

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Tryg

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posted by Tryg on April 6, 1999 at 23:02:41

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